

“This is a fine collection of essays by experts in ecclesiology and pastoral theology and is a true gift for the church as we journey together in the synod on synodality. Experts from around the world explain the barriers to systemic reform and the call to deep listening, attunement to the Holy Spirit, and accompaniment required of the faithful in this time of renewal. Readers will encounter honest and pragmatic analysis of complex and conflict-ridden questions. The authors’ suggestions for dialogue and discernment take seriously the contributions of lay people, especially women, to the ongoing work of the church now and in the future. A must read for pastors, theologians, and all who are participating in the global synod.”

— Emily Reimer-Barry, PhD, Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Diego

“These essays are part of the ‘mutual listening’ that Pope Francis wants to characterize the 2023–2024 synodal process. But it is more than that. For the first time in centuries Catholics are calling for reform—it is a theme in the air we breathe. This is more than ‘renewal’ or some ‘updating’ procedures: we are talking of *reform*, which means admitting we have problems, have made serious mistakes in past centuries, and now we must look the problems in the eye. These eleven essays—each expert and from a different perspective and from across the globe—are a snapshot of our problems; and they are a guide to what we must confront if the synodal process is to be more than fine words.”

— Thomas O’Loughlin, Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology, The University of Nottingham

“In *Reforming the Church*, Declan Marmion and Salvador Ryan present a miniature ‘synod on synodality,’ with clear voices from Australia, Europe, India, South America, and the United States, each presenting a different perspective on the processes and the facts of synodality—past, present, and future. The work is invaluable for the ongoing work of fruitful change in the Church.”

— Phyllis Zagano, PhD, Hofstra University, New York

“Far from ultimatums from impatient reformers, the essays in *Reforming the Church: Global Perspectives* promote thoughtful consideration on how the entire people of God together can become ‘actors of discernment.’ In going out to the peripheries, by genuinely listening to one another’s stories with ‘a hermeneutic of compassion,’ Declan Marmion and Salvador Ryan have chosen a trajectory of synodal paths that not only enlarge our tent, but create space for true communion, participation, and a solid foundation for carrying out Christ’s mission for the future.”

— Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM, Boston College

“Significant church reform is the unfulfilled promise of Vatican II. Pope Francis has now taken up this promise by setting the Church on a synodal path of listening and genuine dialogue. This collection of papers, from theologians and scholars around the world, provides an excellent roadmap for the range of issues needing attention: the role of women; clericalism; the sexual abuse crisis; and so on. May their voices bear fruit in the reforms the Church so urgently needs.”

— Neil Ormerod, Honorary Professor, Alphacrucis University College, Sydney, Australia

“The eminent authors of these essays together offer a substantial contribution to the theology of ecclesial reform, here in the key of ‘synodality’. From multiple perspectives, such as the length of the Catholic tradition or present crises in the church, we are given a refreshing challenge for change. Envisaging the church primarily as all the people of God, this vision for reform demands a listening especially to those on ‘the peripheries’ and an enabling for mission through participation of all in the church’s sacramental and teaching life, as well as its governance. This book will be widely welcomed.”

— Ormond Rush, Australian Catholic University

“‘Synodality’ and ‘reform’ go together seamlessly. Both terms hold out a vision of a community receptive to the diverse voices and gifts of all the baptized. As ever, translating vision into everyday realities is a challenging task, one that requires resources as well as creativity. *Reforming the Church* provides resources—historical, theological, and pastoral—to stimulate and support creativity. The chapters of *Reforming the Church*, drawn from academic research and experiences across the global church, will nourish the mission of the pilgrim community.”

— Richard Lennan, Professor of Systematic Theology,
Boston College—School of Theology and Ministry

“In this compelling collection, issued as Catholics celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Vatican II and prepare for an upcoming synod on synodality, theologians around the world take up key issues that must be addressed in order to advance needed reform in the church. Crafted for a wide audience, these insightful essays will benefit seasoned theologians, pastoral agents, lay and ordained in the church and in society, as well as students who are trying to find their ways during a contentious age.”

— Bradford E. Hinze, Fordham University

“This terrific collection of essays foregrounds the current synod on synodality but is not confined to it, offering us keys to understanding the synod against the broad backdrop of church reform. Scholarly yet vivid, *Reforming the Church* is just what is needed right now: insights and reflections that allow the ordinary faithful to grasp the most important Catholic event since Vatican II.”

— Austen Ivereigh, DPhil, author, journalist, and fellow in
contemporary church history at Campion Hall,
University of Oxford

Reforming the Church

Global Perspectives

Edited by
Declan Marmion
and
Salvador Ryan

Epilogue by
Kristin Colberg



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Introduction

This volume was inspired by the call of Pope Francis on October 10, 2021, for a two-year consultation process leading to a synod on synodality in Rome in October 2023. In doing so, he invited Catholics to “look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say” and to “become experts in the art of encounter.”¹ More recently, the pope announced that the final phase of what has been described as “the greatest consultation effort in human history,” attempting “to listen to the world’s 1.36 billion Catholics,” would now be spread over two synodal meetings in Rome, in October 2023 and October 2024 respectively.²

Although this collection of essays takes its cue from the ongoing synodal processes, it also addresses wider issues relating to church reform while situating these in their historical context. While all contributions discuss themes that have relevance to the universal church, several chapters address issues of more local, or culturally specific, significance, in this way mirroring the results of synodal consultations conducted worldwide. This is especially evident

¹ Catholic News Agency, “2023 Synod on Synodality: Pope Francis Launches 2-year Synodal Path with Call to ‘Encounter, Listen, and Discern,’” October 10, 2021, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/249241/2023-synod-on-synodality-pope-francis-launches-2-year-synodal-path-with-call-to-encounter-listen-and-discern>.

² Christopher Lamb, “Pope Francis Announces Global Synod Meeting Will Occur over Two Years,” *Chicago Catholic*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.chicagocatholic.com/vatican/-/article/2022/10/19/pope-francis-announces-global-synod-meeting-will-occur-over-two-years>.

when one compares the chapters herein with the *Document for the Continental Stage* published on October 25, 2022.³ This is a single global synthesis of all the submissions from countries around the world, which comprised 112 bishops' conferences and 15 Oriental Catholic Churches, in addition to reflections from 17 out of 23 dicasteries of the Roman Curia, from the men's and women's international unions of superiors general, and from Catholic lay associations and movements.⁴ Its call for greater inclusion for many people who feel marginalized or unwelcome in the church is encapsulated in the main title of the document itself: "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," a quotation from Isaiah 54:2. The tent is identified as "a space of *communion*, a place of *participation*, and a foundation for *mission*" (DCS 11).

This volume begins with placing the synodal process and current efforts to renew and reform the church and its structures in a historical context. Christopher Bellitto opens his chapter by acknowledging that reforming the church is "the attempt to fill the gap between what is preached and what is practiced" and that this also asks of the church no small degree of honesty and authenticity: "The key to reform is to be honest about what needs to be fixed." He notes that reforms work best "when arising from real-life circumstances and not theoretically or ideologically." This point is also taken up by a number of other contributors. Bellitto emphasizes the significance of the peripheries in generating movements of reform, noting that "history has repeatedly shown how effectual reform action travels from the periphery to the center and then out to other peripheries." He also cautions against the temptation to regard critics of the church as the church's enemies; rather, he notes that critics of the church are very often those who deeply love the church. It is all too easy for those who would rather resist reform to dismiss reform-minded individuals as "malcontents or heretics," and the history of the church is replete with examples of such much-too-hasty brandings. An observation of

³ General Secretariat for the Synod, *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentrale-EN.pdf>. Hereafter cited as DCS.

⁴ Vatican News, "Synod: Church Leaders Welcome Document for Continental Stage," October 28, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-10/church-leaders-welcome-document-for-continental-stage-of-synod.html>.

the late church historian John W. O'Malley, who spent a great part of his career writing about conciliar reform, is instructive here. In an interview in 2020, O'Malley advocated the adoption of a "hermeneutic of compassion," which would allow for the fact that "people basically want to be good," and to thereby resist "approaching every human expression as simply badly motivated or self-serving."⁵

The deep fissures within the church that such approaches can lead to are discussed by Shaun Blanchard in his essay on true and false reformers in the church. Here Blanchard problematizes the term *reform* itself as being "too pliable, too general, and too ideologically situated to really mean much by itself." After all, it's not enough to regard church reform as simply "a change for the better" if there are wildly diverging views of what constitutes "better." Indeed, for some, truly reforming the church involves nothing less than a reversal of a whole series of previous "reforms" that are considered to have been ultimately damaging and, therefore, need to be jettisoned. Considering the nature of the true reformer, Blanchard turns to the work of Yves Congar (1904–1995), a key inspiration of John XXIII and Vatican II. Congar acknowledged that it was often difficult for reformers to be patient "as their intentions are usually so good, even sometimes utopian," especially when they encounter the magisterium as guardian, "charged with gravely weighing new paths," an idea echoed in the sentiments of Bellitto and O'Malley noted above. Nonetheless, Blanchard notes, Congar was wary of "the powerful prophetic impulse. When unrealized, it can become destructive, sectarian, and ultimately schismatic." In the previously noted essay, Bellitto remarks that "evolutionary change is better than revolutionary change" and, as Blanchard reminds us, Congar stated that the church does not like ultimatums from reformers. The process of reform is thus a very finely balanced enterprise.

Living with tensions and conflicts and allowing mature solutions to emerge over time rather than yielding to the temptation of the quick fix is also a theme that emerges in Declan Marmion's contribution, which examines the 2018 document of the International

⁵ Emanuele Colombo, "'So What?': A Conversation with John W. O'Malley," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 117–133.

Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, in which synodality is identified as the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the church, the people of God.⁶ Synodality represents a move away from an older model in which the pope and the bishops represented the *ecclesia docens* (the “teaching church”) and the rest of the people of God, the *ecclesia discens* (the “learning church”). Synodality, by contrast, recognizes that the *sensus fidei* pertains to *all* the faithful and, indeed, that the church has much to learn from the experience of its skeptical and alienated members. The move to a more synodal *modus operandi* in the church will involve bishops and theologians listening to how the faithful have faced dilemmas, namely, listening to them “tell their stories.” Christopher Bellitto quotes the ecclesiologist Dario Vitali, who identifies this as a process “where the faithful are not extras but actors of discernment through a listening that really wants to recognize in their voices the voice of the Spirit.” Yet the wheels of change often turn slowly, and older ways of doing things can sometimes persist. Francis Gonsalves, writing on the context of the church in India, relates how the “pray, pay, obey” axiom for the laity seems apt to a fairly large extent even today. Gonsalves notes that an excuse often given to keep the lay faithful out of decision-making is that “they do not have sufficient training,” but goes on to ask, “If this is true, then, while so much time and money is spent on training candidates for priesthood, why is there such hesitancy to train promising lay faithful to be leaders in the church?”

Moving away from a model of the *ecclesia docens* and the *ecclesia discens* also involves a reimagining of the dynamic between bishops and lay faithful. In his chapter, Rafael Luciani regards synodality as “a whole process of ecclesial transfiguration that finds its foundation in the *essential*—and not auxiliary—commitment of *co-responsibility* proper to the model of the church as the people of God” with an emphasis on the “ecclesial *we*.” He notes that “it is not the people of God that must be integrated into the hierarchy by participating in episcopal structures . . . but the hierarchy that

⁶ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 2, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

must place itself . . . within the people of God, listening to the voice of all the faithful."

Massimo Faggioli examines another aspect of this listening to the voice of the faithful when he addresses issues surrounding the process of episcopal appointments. He argues that the issue of the reform of the appointment of bishops "must be seen from an ecclesiological point of view, that is, the need for the procedure to reflect more the idea of the church as the people of God, participating in the selection of their pastors, in ways that foster the unity of the church but also accountability and responsibility." Meanwhile, taking inspiration from Pope Francis's reference to the need for a "conversion of the papacy," Francis Gonsalves suggests that "if more bishops strove for a 'conversion of the episcopacy,' things would change and more people would be active in church life and mission."

The synodal process has inevitably cast further light on the catastrophic effects of the abuse of power within the church and the ongoing legacy of clerical sex abuse, which the *Document for the Continental Stage* terms "an open wound that continues to inflict pain on victims and survivors, on their families, and on their communities" (DCS 20). Agnès Desmazières reminds us that, in line with his conception of a "servant church," Yves Congar maintained that "the first service that the church gives to the world is to tell the truth" and that "the shift from an essentialist conception of the church, as perfect and thus pure, to a more historical one" has led to a greater focus on an institution tainted by human sinfulness. Thus, if the synodal process is to mean anything, it must also involve the church facing up to some uncomfortable truths.

In her contribution on the Synodal Path in Germany, Julia Knop points to power structures within the Roman Catholic Church that support a system that "has massively damaged, still damages, and can further damage the physical and psychological integrity of boys, girls, women, and female members of religious orders," and she notes that many who "are excluded and discriminated against by the church's teaching and practice" perceive the institution to be more interested in guarding its doctrine than in protecting its faithful from harm, even at the hands of the church itself.

Reflecting, in turn, on the parables of the good shepherd and the good housekeeper, Ethna Regan suggests that "the revelations

of recent years have shown us that an overreliance on shepherd leadership and flock-followers has brought great human damage and ecclesial corruption." She sees the reforms of Pope Francis, albeit moving too slowly for some, as "reaching into the darkest and least accessible parts of the *ecclesia*, illuminating these spaces, and searching for what is lost under the accumulated dirt of abuse, clericalism, and hierarchicalism." Regan, invoking the post-synodal document of 1971, *Justice in the World*, highlights two objectives of the synod on synodality, "the challenge of congruence between teaching about justice and the practice of justice *ad intra*, and the question of credibility." The report from superiors of institutes of consecrated life, as found in the *Document for the Continental Stage*, explicitly names this: "Sexism in decision-making and Church language is prevalent in the Church. . . . As a result, women are excluded from meaningful roles in the life of the Church, discriminated against by not receiving a fair wage for their ministries and services. Women religious are often regarded as cheap labour" (DCS 63). Regan identifies justice *ad intra* as "one of the church's most pressing responsibilities in order to regain credibility," and she recommends the further development of the field of ecclesial ethics "to enable a more accountable and participative church."

In his chapter, Bishop Vincent Long, reflecting on the theme of synodality in light of the experience of the Australian church, contends, "The church cannot have a better future if it persists in the old paradigm of triumphalism, self-reference, and male dominance. So long as we continue to exclude women from the church's governance structures, decision-making processes, and institutional functions, we deprive ourselves of the richness of our full humanity. So long as we continue to make women invisible and inferior in the church's language, liturgy, theology, and law, we impoverish ourselves." Bishop Long also calls for a much more inclusive engagement with those on the margins, noting that "the future of ecclesial synodality is much more in the peripheries than in the synod hall at the Vatican," which echoes a point made by Christopher Bellitto in his contribution.

This plea for an engagement with those on the margins is, perhaps, made most emphatically by Pedro Trigo when he reminds us that "synodality with the poor . . . marks the measure of our fidelity to the path of Jesus." He challenges Christian theologians

by stating that they often fail to “understand that conceptual knowledge of realities has nothing to do with experiencing them in life and living by them. Until they grasp that difference and realize that knowledge is an invitation to live, they will hardly be Christian.” Such realities were starkly highlighted by the report from the Bolivian church, cited in the *Document for the Continental Stage*. It expressed regret that so many remained unrepresented in the synodal process, namely “the poorest, the lonely elderly, indigenous peoples, migrants without any affiliation and who lead a precarious existence, street children, alcoholics and drug addicts, those who have fallen into the plots of criminality and those for whom prostitution seems their only chance of survival, victims of trafficking, survivors of abuse (in the Church and beyond), prisoners, groups who suffer discrimination and violence because of race, ethnicity, gender, culture and sexuality” (DCS 40). Of course, this list of the marginalized might equally apply to any one of the responding regions globally, reminding us that beyond the welcome language of “enlarging the tent,” there are harsh realities that are much more difficult to navigate in real life. The assertion of the Italian report, cited in the *Document for the Continental Stage*, that “the Church-home does not have doors that close, but a perimeter that continually widens” (DCS 29), hits the right synodal note, but it remains a considerable challenge to translate such inclusive rhetoric into concrete action. For Julia Knop, synodality needs to go beyond a synodal culture and mindset. “It also needs synodal structures; otherwise, arbitrariness will ultimately win out.” The search for what Ethna Regan terms “the loss of the *imago Christi* in our structures and systems” will, indeed, take time, patience, and a deep, respectful listening. For Regan, the parable of the good housekeeper “reminds us that the recovery of memory of the forgotten, the finding of what is lost, and the hard, dirty work of cleaning the house is primarily God’s work. Our efforts at reform are a participation in this.” It is our hope that the essays that follow will be helpful in reflecting on the theme of reform within the church—what it has meant in the past, what it means for us now, and what it might mean in the future.

Declan Marmion & Salvador Ryan

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Shaun Blanchard is lecturer in theology at the University of Notre Dame Australia (Fremantle, Western Australia). A graduate of the University of North Carolina, Oxford University, and Marquette University, Shaun writes on a variety of topics in early modern and modern Catholicism. He is the author of *The Synod of Pistoia and Vatican II* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and coeditor, with Ulrich Lehner, of *The Catholic Enlightenment: A Global Anthology* (Catholic University of America Press, 2021). His most recent work, coauthored with Stephen Bullivant, is *Vatican II: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

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Julia Knop is professor of dogmatic theology at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Erfurt, Germany. In April 2021 she was elected to the Central Committee of Catholics whose current major project is the synodal path in Germany, for which it is responsible and which it is shaping together with the German Bishops’ Conference. Publications include *Beziehungsweise: Theologie der Ehe, Partnerschaft und Familie* (Pustet, 2019) and *Heute christlich glauben: Der Leitfaden für die Ökumene im Alltag* (Herder, 2019).

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